

FOOD CENTS

*Ann Hertzler and Tim Roberts**



Everyone wants to know how to get more value for their money. The food budget is one of the larger family budget items. Every dollar spent on food is a dollar that cannot be spent for other things.

Start by identifying all family income and household expenses. Separate the list into fixed expenses (those that do not change monthly) and variable expenses (those that you can control). The food budget has a fixed portion that provides basic nutrition and a variable portion that provides some flexibility.

The USDA has estimated the cost of feeding families at home. The difference in the costs of the plans reflects convenience, variety, and higher-cost alternatives.

Meals eaten away from home should be considered in the food budget. Either reduce the food budget by the cost of the food eaten in restaurants or indicate the cost of these meals on your weekly menu plan.

A food budget needs to consider:

- Nutritional needs of family members
- Food costs
- Food waste
- Food handling and storage
- Food preparation skills
- How family members make food decisions at home and away

NUTRITION PLAN

Consider these recommendations contained in *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*:

A Aim for fitness

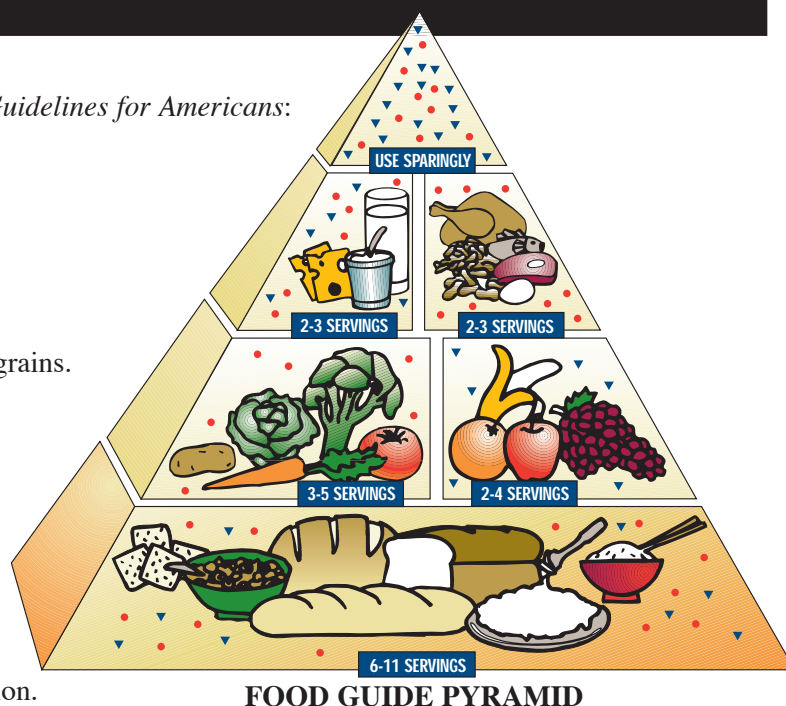
- Aim for a healthy weight.
- Be physically active each day.

B Build a healthy base

- Let the Pyramid guide your food choices.
- Choose a variety of grains daily, especially whole grains.
- Choose a variety of fruits and vegetables daily.
- Keep food safe to eat.

C Choose sensibly

- Choose a diet that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol and moderate in total fat.
- Choose beverages and foods to moderate your intake of sugars.
- Choose and prepare foods with less salt.
- If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation.



FOOD GUIDE PYRAMID

*Extension Specialist, Human Nutrition, Foods and Exercise, Virginia Tech; Extension Specialist, Food Safety, Virginia Tech, respectively.

SHOPPING TIPS

Start With A List

- It can be in your head, but it is better on paper.
- LIST the food and the amount needed. To be really organized, list items in the order found in the store and leave perishables and frozen foods until last.
- Avoid impulse buying. The more stores you go to or the more often you go to the store, the more chances you have for impulse buying.
- Be sure that you have storage space for the amount and type of food purchased.

Specials

- Read food ads in the newspaper or at the store.
- Compare the special prices with regular prices of other products.
- Remember, food is only a bargain if 1) you can use it, 2) your family will eat it, 3) it is truly cheaper than competitive products, and 4) you have considered the cost of other ingredients needed to prepare it.

Check:

- Does the store accept food stamps, coupons?
- Does it cost extra time and money to travel there?
- Do you have to buy more than you can use?
- Do you know how to prepare items purchased at these stores?

Coupons/Rebates/Trading Stamps

- Look for coupons for products you normally use or want to try.
- Calculate the true cost after subtracting coupons, rebates, and trading stamps.
- Shop on the days when the store offers double value for your coupons.

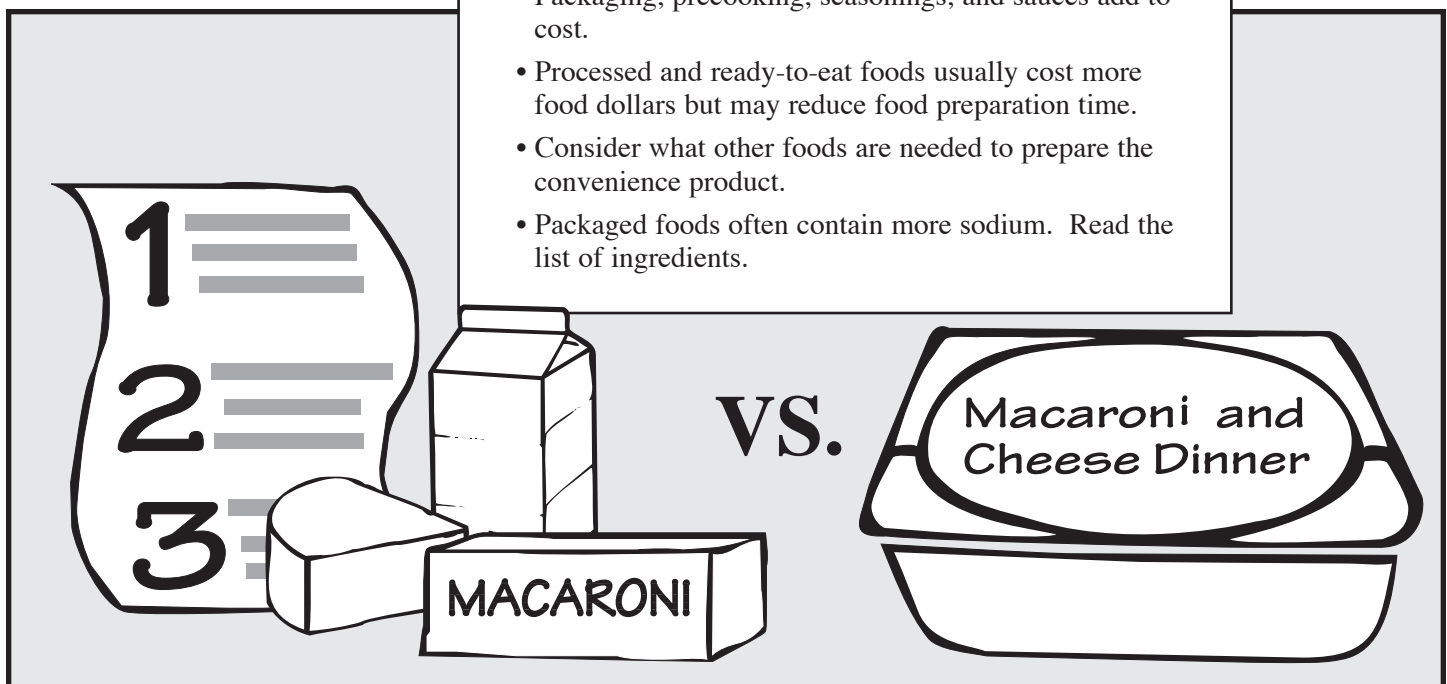
Compare Brands

- Generic brands, store brands, or name brands.
- All are safe to eat and nutritional content should be the same for all brands.
- Try different brands to see what suits your purpose.
- Don't be fooled by the name of a product. Names can be a marketing gimmick. "Power" food and "cereal" bars often have higher calories and are more expensive.



Convenience

- Packaging, precooking, seasonings, and sauces add to cost.
- Processed and ready-to-eat foods usually cost more food dollars but may reduce food preparation time.
- Consider what other foods are needed to prepare the convenience product.
- Packaged foods often contain more sodium. Read the list of ingredients.



BUYING HINTS

Convenience items usually cost more than home-prepared foods. Here are some tips for each of the Food Guide Pyramid Groups that may help you save food dollars.

Milk, Yogurt and Cheese

- Buy cheese by the block and do your own slicing, grating, grinding, and chopping.
- Compare prices of fresh and dried milk.
- For more calcium per serving, add dried milk powder to fresh milk or to casserole ingredients.
- Shop for calcium fortified foods.



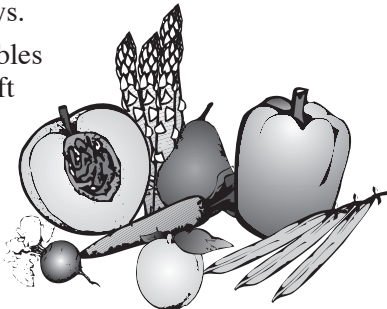
Strong Bones

VCE Pub. 348-019, *Calcium Checklist — Food Guide Pyramid*

www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/nutrition/348-019/348-019.html

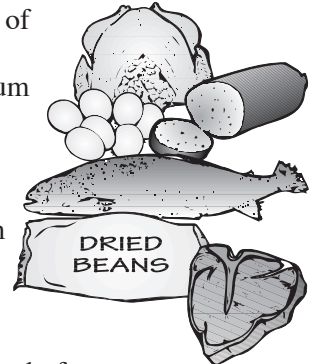
Fruits and Vegetables for Vitamin A and Vitamin C

- Most fruits and vegetables are nutritious whether fresh, frozen, or canned. Compare prices for your best buys.
- Fresh fruits and vegetables should not have any soft spots or decayed pieces.
- Store fresh fruits and vegetables so they do not spoil.



Meat, Poultry, Fish, Dry Beans, Eggs and Nuts

- Brown and white eggs have the same nutritional value and taste.
- Bulk sliced or chunk pieces of luncheon meat are usually cheaper than sliced or vacuum packed.
- Preparing your own recipe with dried beans is usually cheaper and has less sodium and fat than buying the same thing in prepared form.
- Figure cost per serving instead of cost per pound.
- Compare price of turkey and chicken. Save money by basting your own turkey.
- Consider vegetable protein such as beans for main dishes.



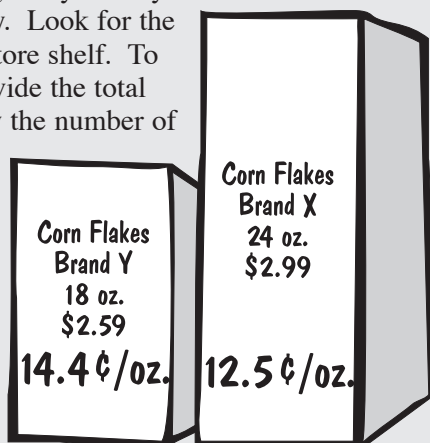
Bread, Cereal, Rice, and Pasta

- Buy whole-grain or enriched products.
- Day-old bread costs about half as much as fresh bread. It is good for toasting or cooking.
- Fancier breads cost more than plain breads.
- Highly fortified breakfast cereals may cost more.



Unit Pricing

The largest package may or may not be the best buy. Look for the unit price on the store shelf. To get cost per oz, divide the total cost of the item by the number of ounces it contains. By determining the cost per unit (oz, lb, etc.), you can compare the true cost of different brands.



Universal Product Code

The cash register-computer reads the bar code and charges the price for the indicated product. Watch to be sure that the price charged is correct. The bar code is often the “proof of purchase” needed for many rebates.



Label Sense

VCE Publication 348-076, *Use the New Food Label to Shop Smart.*

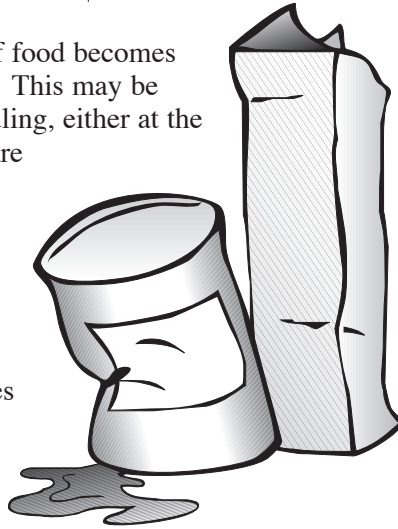
<http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/nutrition/348-076/348-076.html>

SAFETY AND SANITATION

In the Store

Food dollars are wasted if food becomes spoiled and unsafe to eat. This may be caused by poor food handling, either at the store or at home. There are ways that you can reduce this food dollar waste.

- Select unbroken packages, undented cans.
- Check expiration dates on refrigerator/freezer items and on cereals and mixes. The date stamp on the products can mean many things. Learn which of the following applies:



Pack Date - the date the product was manufactured, processed, or packaged.

Pull or Sell Date - the last recommended day of sale that allows sufficient time for home storage and use. Example: "Best when purchased by (date)."

Freshness Date - the date after which the product is not likely to be at peak quality.

Example: "Sell by (date)."

Expiration Date - the last day the product should be eaten or used for assured quality.

Example: "Do not use after (date)."

In the kitchen

- Wash hands and work surfaces with warm, soapy water.
- Sanitize work surfaces with a bleach solution (i.e. 1 tsp. bleach per quart of water).
- Use clean pots, pans, and cooking utensils.
- Keep shelf-stable foods in a cool, dry place. Use tightly sealed containers to store foods.
- Store shelf-stable nonperishable foods in a cool, dry place and not in sunlight, next to a stove, or beside a hot radiator.
- Keep kitchen clean and free of bugs.

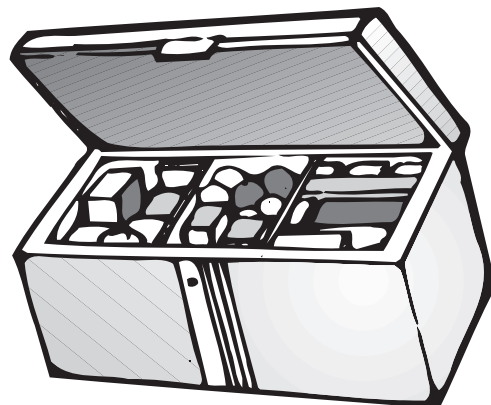
Refrigerator Storage

- Check refrigerator temperature (Below 40°F).
- Refrigerate perishable food and leftovers within 2 hours of purchase or preparation.
- For rapid cooling, put leftovers in clean, shallow containers.
- Wrap or cover food to prevent loss of moisture and flavor.
- Store raw meat, poultry, and seafood on bottom shelf of refrigerator to prevent cross-contamination.
- Keep the refrigerator clean and free of spills. An open box of baking soda will help prevent odors.



Freezer Storage

- Check freezer temperature (Below 0°F).
 - Package food in moisture-vapor proof wrap such as: aluminum foil, freezer paper or bags, or plastic freezer cartons.
- (Note: As a rule of thumb, leave 1" air space at top of containers to prevent breakage from expansion).
- Label food - indicate contents and date of freezing.
 - Get perishable foods from the store to the home freezer as quickly as possible.



Food Safety

VCE Publication 348-960, *Food Storage Guidelines For Consumers*.

<http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/foods/348-960/348-960.html>